

About ReadSC

The South Carolina Center for the Book

The South Carolina Center for the Book is the South Carolina Affiliate of the Library of Congress Center for the Book and is a cooperative project of the South Carolina State Library, the University of South Carolina School of Library and Information Science and the Humanities Council^{SC}. The Center is located at 1500 Senate Street, Columbia, SC.

The South Carolina Center for the Book celebrates South Carolina's rich literary heritage and brings public attention to the importance of books, writers, and reading.

The South Carolina Center for the Book envisions a state where there is a community focus on the joy and value of reading.

For more information, please visit ReadSC.org



2016-2017

Letters About Literature

Awards Ceremony

LETTERS ABOUT LITERATURE

April 28, 2017

10:00 a.m.

Columbia, South Carolina



Notes

Introductions

Dr. Curtis R. Rogers,
Coordinator, South Carolina
Center for the Book

Welcome

Leesa Aiken, Director,
South Carolina State Library

Debbie Yoho, President,
South Carolina State Library
Foundation

Awards

Student winners will be
introduced by judges.

Winning students will read their
letter and receive their award.

Photos may be taken after each
student receives the award and
group photos will be taken at the
end of the program.

Closing

Andersen Cook, Statewide
Initiatives Coordinator

Notes

This image shows a single sheet of white paper with horizontal ruling lines. The lines are evenly spaced and run across the width of the page. There are no margins, text, or other markings on the paper.

Level III

1st Place Madeline Wilder: Richard Winn Academy,
Winnsboro - \$100

2nd Place Savannah Hall: North Charleston - \$50

3rd Place Elizabeth Smolenski: Myrtle Beach - \$25

Level II

1st Place	Emily Yi: Sterling School, Greenville - \$100
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2nd Place Charles Sanderson: Sterling School,
Greenville - \$50

3rd Place Emmalynne Eshleman: Sterling School,
Greenville - \$25

Level I

1st Place Emma Tiberian: Thomas Cario Middle School, Mt. Pleasant - \$100

2nd Place Meenakshi Balachandran: Calvary
Christian School, Myrtle Beach - \$50

3rd Place Dylan Sampson: Hilton Head Christian Academy, Hilton Head - \$25

Level III, 1st Place

Madeline G. Wilder

Winnsboro, SC 29180

December 02, 2016

Dear Mr. Fitzgerald,

Because of Gatsby, I know the value of a dream. Because of Gatsby, I know the value of a dollar. Because of Gatsby, I know the value of “me”. Thank you for your novel, these amazingly rich characters, and for the gift of realization.

I am one of five girls in my graduating class of sixteen in the rural town of Winnsboro SC, population 3422. Like most small town southern girls, I have grown up believing in haints, well-seasoned collards, good manners, and true love. When I was a big bow wearing, lucky charms eating, elementary school kid, I sang the loudest and smiled the biggest in all my school programs, believing that everyone up there was just as happy as I was. I managed to maneuver through the battleground we call middle school, relatively unscathed, mainly because I was oblivious. Today, as I tidy up the loose ends of my youth in these final months of high school I realize I have changed. I am now more aware.

I read your novel, *The Great Gatsby*, during my sophomore year, which fell in those “younger and more vulnerable years”. I was still quite impressionable and still quite naive. It was your character, Nick Carraway, with whom I immediately felt a certain kinship. I remember my parents giving me similar advice regarding my view and subsequent judgement of others. According to Carraway, his father had told him, “Whenever you feel like criticizing any one,” he told me, “just remember that all the people in this world haven’t had the advantages that you’ve had.” I have grown up on that very same philosophy. Like Nick, I have always accepted others with those words rolling around in the back corners of my mind. Over the past couple of years, I, like Nick, have lived most abundantly on the fringes of the action. I’ve been to the parties, witnessed the chaos, the excess, the corruption of innocence, and the absolute satire of American teenage life. I’ve listened to the secrets, been tolerant of the absurd, and grown accustomed to indifference and the absence of loyalty. I’ve learned that not everyone is who they seem, that money can buy absolution, and that in a school as small as mine, knowing with what and with whom you are dealing is essential to survival in this microcosm.

Understanding that you wrote this in the 1920's, a few decades prior to mine, I think you might find it rather fascinating that we are still here- living in a society where the moral compass is still pointing south. Like Nick, I've met my fair share of Daisy Buchanans. Thanks to you, I saw them coming and made a purposeful and soulful detour around whatever disaster of which they were in the midst. I've experienced a version of the boisterous and chauvinistic Tom Buchanan through a brief courtship, of which I still feel lucky to have escaped. Oh and the Jordan Bakers in my classes over the years, who have effortlessly gathered answers from the smart kid's tests, and covertly handed off homework to be recycled, are just too many to count. Then there are the Jay Gatsby's, the ones who are "worth the whole damn bunch put together"- now those are quite rare. I've met only one or two versions of this one. Undaunted, yet flawed, he represents who many of us are on the inside. While he wore the most fashionable clothes, drove around in the flashiest of cars, and hosted the best of parties, he was ultimately alone. His

Notes

Prize money generously provided by



Improving Literacy Through a Strong Foundation

The South Carolina State Library Foundation supports and advocates for libraries and literacy awareness by fostering collaborations with public and private partnerships that enhance lifelong learning for all patrons and South Carolinians.

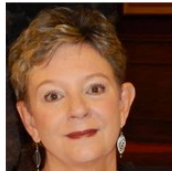
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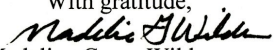
Tally Parham



Pat Feehan

persona was far different from his character. To some readers he had it all, yet had nothing. To me, he had nothing, but had it all.

Through my education, that thankfully includes remarkable novels like yours, I have become more aware of the snares and traps of life, and the influence that others have on our journey. However, I still believe in good food, good manners, and true love. I also now know that haints are indeed real. They come in the form of bad decisions that leave scars, we simply live with them hanging around. I also know that the world is full of shysters, hypocrites, and bullies. Thankfully though, I know that there is good out there as well. Maybe “good” is out there walking around in a pink suit and wearing a charming grin. Maybe “good” is in line behind me at Dollar General with some extra change for the woman behind her. Maybe “good” is in all of us. I choose to spend my life gaging a person by their heart, though not unmindful of their deeds. These days I prepare to leave my high school years behind me, armed with your Gatsby lessons and seated among the many characters who could easily be found between the pages of your novel. I will always remember fondly my time spent on Long Island between West Egg and East Egg, and know that I’m better for that time. I believe we too, my class of 2017, will “beat on, boats against the current, borne back ceaselessly into the past.”

With gratitude,

Madeline Grace Wilder

Level III, 2nd Place

Dear Mr. Weir,

From the time I was small, I yearned to go to space. But by the end of second grade, I was convinced I couldn't. Math and science were such mysteries to me, and my grades showed my lack of understanding. I began to believe that those who did go up to space were geniuses, and I was not one of them - I was convinced that I could no more go to space than I could hold my breath for three hours. One of my other passions was English - I loved to read and write, and so I knew that I could more realistically go into a career involving those skills. Until I was in tenth grade, I hypothesized that I would be an English professor. However, my interest in space was not completely gone; I read many science fiction novels and was fascinated by the amazing potential of the unknown.

The summer of my sophomore year, I attended a camp called Shared Worlds at Wofford College in Spartanburg, South Carolina. One day, they took us to a local bookstore, and as I perused the aisles of books, I came upon *The Martian*. I remember retrieving it from the shelf and opening it to the first page. When I opened it, I realized it was signed, though it didn't mean much to me at the time. After reading the first sentence and seeing an inappropriate word in it, my head snapped up as if I had heard a gunshot. I quickly looked around the store and saw the other students excitedly scanning the shelves for thrilling stories, as I had been. But this gunshot was only in my head, and it was not because I was angry at you for using the word - in fact, it was because at that very moment I realized that I would not just enjoy Mark Watney and his story, but that your story would inspire me. I had read the sleeve of the book and I knew Mark was intelligent before ever reading beyond the first page, and the fact that he had outright cussed had proved something to me: astronauts and those who get them into space are not scary, all-knowing beings. They can acknowledge the state of their situation (in Mark's case, the state is pretty negative), and could work together to improve that situation; they are human. I understood Mark's math, science, and humor - it was as if I was being told directly that I could study, work hard, take everything one problem at a time as Mark had done with his food supply, Pathfinder, and the rover - and understand. I didn't need to be a genius, but I needed to be intelligent and knowledgeable, and that I could accomplish. I realized that as Mark had established communication with Earth and lost it, I once had my hope and lost it; like Mark, too, I eventually regained it. The prospect of working at NASA became less daunting and more realistic.

Though I didn't meet you to get the book signed, every time I read the book, your signature means more to me. Writer to writer, your story inspired me. Because of *The Martian*, I have studied the topic of spaceflight as well as physics even more than I had done previously, and visited Johnson Space Center in Houston to see the Neutral Buoyancy Lab, Mission Control Center, and a Saturn V rocket. I'm a senior in high school now, and I have recently applied to colleges with the intended major of Physics and plan to go to graduate school for Astronomy and Astrophysics. Your book has changed the direction of my life; I am allowing my curiosity to drive me instead of fear. Thank you so much.

Savannah Hall

2016-2017 Judges

Chuck Baker *School Library Media Specialist*
Lugoff-Elgin Middle School

Amber Conger *SCLA 1st Vice President & Director,*
Kershaw County Library

Jenny Dilworth *Children's Librarian*
Richland Library

Dr. Patricia E. Feehan *Associate Professor*
USC School of Library & Information Science

Pamela Hoppock *Learning Experiences Coordinator*
South Carolina State Library

Kim Jeffcoat *Director, South Carolina Center for*
Children's Books and Literature

Tamara King *Community Relations Director*
Richland Library

Dr. Sara L. Schwebel *Associate Professor*
USC Department of English Language and Literature

T.J. Wallace *Assistant Director*
South Carolina Humanities

Level I, 3rd Place

Dylan Sampson

Hilton Head Christian Academy

Hilton Head, 29926

1/12/17

Dear Mr. Gipson,

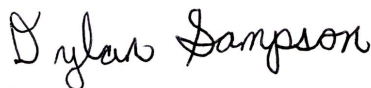
I once had a beautiful old dog named Misha who was a lovely Pekinese. She was kind of like Old Yeller in ways, but just a little bit smaller. She was yellow and she sure yelled alright, everyone on our street knew that she yelled obnoxiously loud like it was one plus one. Until the day came when she sadly passed, and I wept and mourned for days until fifth grade came. I always kept an image of her in my brain and couldn't get it out. It felt like day after day there was a chain holding me back from getting to go outside and be social anytime, but instead I would stay in my room almost all day and didn't ever feel like eating. During that time span I had gotten very thin. I was never really hungry at all, and I was so very sad and depressed during that time period. She was anything and everything you could ask for in a dog. It was so hard to lose my best friend. That image of her was stuck in my head until I read your book.

Your book made me think differently about Misha's death. I always thought of it like it was a glass half empty, but your book made me change my perspective and made it a glass half full. It was so hard to lose her, but after I read your book I realized that that she would have only suffered and hurt more from the horrid sickness that was constantly spreading throughout her poor body. That day was dark and stormy like it was meant to happen that very night and it sadly did. Little did I know it, but after her death there was also a horrid disease running through my body, and that was loneliness. I never knew that there was an antidote for my disease. I didn't know that there was a cure that would instantly stop my disease from spreading even more than it already has until I read your book. Your book saved my mind from emotionally breaking down. If I hadn't read your book then I wouldn't know what to do with myself.

Yours truly,

Dylan Sampson

Dylan Sampson



Level III, 3rd Place

Elizabeth Ann Smolenski

Myrtle Beach, SC 29575

November 25th, 2016

Dear William Faulkner,

As a small child, my favorite pastime was easily that of reading, to the extent that my mother actually would ground me by taking away my books (until I reluctantly cleaned my room, of course). I stayed up to see the warm and early rays of dawn, not on my cell phone but rather, with my nose buried in the Harry Potter series, then the Series of Unfortunate Events, then the Anne of Green Gables series. Throughout my high school endeavors, I had often found myself reading my assigned books without actually reading them. I flipped mindlessly through each page whilst simultaneously scribbling in the margins a few of my annotations; I had lost my literary spark. Fortunately, this mind numbing cycle was broken during my junior year when I was assigned your novel, *The Sound and the Fury*.

Your novel curated a sort of conscientious realization towards the many issues which manifest within our cultural society. The role of the female protagonist, Caddy Compson, was surprisingly a huge inspiration for me. Her relentless independence and strife to support her child and protect her mentally ill brother posed a sort of heroine that I had yet to read about-- she was unorthodox but necessary; whether you intended for her to be interpreted as such or not, it was fortunate for myself to do so. I was no longer afraid to be different and act out of my own desire as opposed to the many people who fell victim to "people-pleasing." I felt empowered to hear of a woman who fought against all odds, (from a society who condemned her morals, to an unexpected pregnancy, to an abusive brother) yet was still able to maintain independence from those who hurt her. Due to her impaired reputation concerning her illegitimate child, Caddy's options to maintain independence were mostly between prostitution and marriage. Most women of this period would settle for the latter as a way to escape the promiscuity and maintain their repertoires, however, she did not-- she simply did not care for society's opinion on her choices and did what she preferred to do.

Your novel has opened my eyes to the ever-growing issue of gender inequality, because I realized that I, myself, was so often a victim of such strikingly similar problems. As a young lady I am taught to never walk alone to my car at night, and to hold my key as if it were a dagger. I am taught to scream "Fire!" instead of "Rape!" because a fire spreads but apparently rape does not. I am taught to say "I have a boyfriend" rather than "No, thank you" when I am approached because so often does it happen that a man will respect another man more than he will respect me. I am taught that I have to be a mother and wife. I am taught that I probably would not be capable of handling the workload that comes with medical school-- I should probably just settle for housewifery.

Despite these struggles, my chest swells with pride when I see all of the strong women in our society actively trying to make a difference, such as Malala Yousafzai, Michelle Obama,

Yoko Ono, and above all else, my mother who broke the feminine mystique she was trapped in by attending graduate school for her Master's Degree and, furthermore, passing the classes with flying colors. Women have come such a long way in the past several decades alone, however, I am disheartened when I am told that "the feminism trend needs to stop" by a female peer. I cannot help but think to myself, how can one oppose a movement which asks solely for equality? Society has formed such a negative connotation around the term feminism, that people have blurred the meaning for the movement by using propagandist slogans such as "Feminism is cancer" and "Feminists hate men" and "Feminazis." In every movement in history, there has always been radical individuals in each contrasting regard, but we cannot allow the few to define the majority. I weep for those that feel threatened by an empowerment of women. I weep for the families where the women have no voice. I weep for those that fail to see the importance of human progress and how its dependance settles upon the entire human race, not merely the male side.

I desperately yearn for a society in which I may look my future daughter in the eyes and take comfort knowing that she may take a bus to school without being touched by a stranger. I desire a day where we rather teach our boys that they can play with dolls, or wear pink, or cry. I desire a day where we teach our girls that they can be president, or imperfect, or strongly spoken.

I believe that had Caddy Compson truly existed, she would have influenced other girls of her time to stand up for their beliefs and break away from toxicity-- a reformist. I often ponder how I may help in this ancient struggle of the sexes, which led me to think of how I would like to one day first-handedly empower young women, not just in my culture, but around the world. I would like to travel to less fortunate countries as a successful woman to portray to the young girls that they are capable beings who may develop into any sort of person of which they choose, because they are just as extraordinary as their male counterpart. In these countries live our world's next great authors, doctors, physicists, mathematicians, artists, yet these girls are so often confined to lives with little or no educational opportunities-- how can we, as the human race, progress?

Elizabeth Ann Smolenski

performed the forty-five minute melodrama in our living room in front of our grandparents, parents, and adult friends. Afterwards everyone clapped loudly.

I noticed in your novel how the March sisters enjoyed giving gifts to make others smile. I liked that! My best friend and I share a birthday tradition of giving. I enjoy the wide smile on Addison's face when I surprise her with a puzzle or jewelry-making kit. Recently I made puppets from popsicle sticks and construction paper for my dad's birthday that represented life: a car, a heart, an iPhone, and a family photo. He said he enjoyed my creativity more than any store-bought gift.

Miss Alcott, I'll have to be honest. I imagined the events in *Little Women* turning out differently: Beth living longer, Jo marrying Laurie, Amy becoming a great artist, and Meg living rich. That's when I realized life does not go exactly as planned, like the time when Amrithaa thought she would become a firefighter, but realized that occupation was not for her. Or when I was little and my family decided to go to the pool, but it thundered the entire day. This past summer we agreed my grandmother in Australia would come to our home at the end of August, but it was postponed to the beginning of September, then the end of September, then the beginning of October. She finally arrived safely on October tenth—in the middle of Hurricane Matthew.

In the end I enjoyed all the families in *Little Women* joining together and having fun. This reminds me of the fun and love I share with my family no matter what's going on in our lives. Even though my dad is gone a lot with his job, like Mr. March, we treasure family time. I will definitely share this book with all my friends and family.

Sincerely,

Meenakshi Balachandran

Meenakshi Balachandran

Sixth grade

Level I, 2nd Place

Meenakshi Balachandran

Myrtle Beach, SC 29575

Dear Louisa May Alcott,

This past summer I read all the books in my grandmother's entire house while visiting her in Sri Lanka, but my favorite was one I brought with me: *Little Women*. Your heartwarming story filled my days with adventure, enabling me to feel like I was in the book—actually one of the sisters. Sometimes I felt like crying, other times I burst out laughing. Usually I find it difficult to enjoy historical fiction. Often there is not enough action or drama to keep me interested. Sometimes a plot becomes redundant and bores me. But you did it. Not only did your writing amuse me, but it taught me as well. I learned about the style of clothes people wore, their occupations, and various ideas that showcased the differences between men and women, such as party manners and etiquette.

Overall your characters were interesting and funny. My favorite was Beth. I admire her unselfish attitude. She reminds me of a time when my sister, Amrithaa, pleaded to help her empty the dishwasher when it was her turn. I ended up unloading the entire dishwasher, because I was kind enough to help her more. Beth's death made me determined to finish your book. I wanted to learn about the futures the other sisters would have.

Little Women changed my way of thinking about historical fiction because it seems like a true story, disappointing at times and joyful at others. Everyday I looked forward to reading more about Amy, Beth, Jo, and Meg. I was quite surprised when Laurie married Amy, yet I kept wondering what Jo's life might have been like if she had married Laurie instead of Professor Behr. Some days I would read until eleven o'clock at night. My parents kept telling me to turn off the light and go to sleep.

Relating to the relationship between the four March sisters is quite easy since I also love performing plays and writing stories. I've been writing stories since first grade, each one enchanting me more than the last. Every night in second grade I would write a new story before falling asleep. This past summer my sisters and I performed a play I wrote and directed with friends from Illinois who were visiting. The script was about two enemy sisters who fought for the crown, killed each other, and became one angel. My sister, Amrithaa, and one of my friends, Suhani, were actors. The other two, my younger sister Abhirami, and Muskaan, Suhani's sister, helped throughout the play with lights, curtains, props, sound, music, costumes, and sets. Amrithaa borrowed my snow queen costume, while Suhani used our pirate costume. We

Level II, 1st Place

Emily Yi
Greenville, SC 29607
November 28, 2016

Dear Ms. Sharon Creech,

There are several different types of books.

I've known that for a long time— from when I was in first or second grade, from when I was sitting on a lumpy elementary school carpet decorated with alligators, bananas, and cats listening to our school librarian drone on about fiction and nonfiction books. *Fiction and nonfiction are the two biggest categories of books*, she told us. Made-up stories and truth.

Now, though, I think that that's a matter of opinion. Because now that I haven't sat on that old carpet in five or six years, and now that I've done and seen things that I don't think my six year old brain would have been able to even imagine, I don't think that fiction and nonfiction are the two biggest categories of books anymore.

I think that there are dull, tiresome books that are really just shapes and lines on a page, the kind of book that your eyes sweep over and you promptly forget; I think that there are mildly interesting books, which are just words and sentences on paper that you process, and I think that there are stories. *Real stories*.

The kind of book that is a whole new universe, the kind of book that is a journey as thrilling and real as a road trip to the Grand Canyon or a plane ride to the other side of the world. The the kind of book in which you cry whenever your favorite character does, the kind of book that you stay awake until three in the morning to finish, the kind of book that makes you spend the rest of the day in a haze because *you just can't believe that happened*, the kind of book that reaches into you and grabs onto something, deep inside, the kind of book that influences how you think and speak and write from that day forward.

That's the kind of book *Walk Two Moons* is.

I can still remember the first time I heard of it. It was on a poster with all of the books that had ever won a Newbery Medal in a public library, and I remember imagining someone with each of their feet standing on separate white spheres, clomping through empty space with their reused-golf-ball shoes.

It never came to the forefront of my mind again until one day, years later, that I was browsing through a library once again, searching for an interesting-looking book that I hadn't read yet. That was when I came across *Walk Two Moons* again.

Level I, 1st Place

Emma Tiberian

Mount Pleasant, SC 29466

Dear Rodman Philbrick,

When I think of friendship and teamwork, your book, *Freak the Mighty*, instantly comes to mind. In the extraordinary tale of two unlikely friends, I witnessed my view of the world drastically change. The friendship of Maxwell "Max" Kane and Kevin "Freak" Avery showed me to not judge others, listen to my own voice, and be a better person.

You portrayed Max with a difficult background. People judged Max because his father, Kenneth Kane, had a violent, criminal past. Despite his towering height, Max's low self-esteem allowed him to be easily bullied. He was known as slow and stupid. Freak, on the other hand, was diagnosed with a disorder which caused short stature. People viewed him as intelligent and creative. You brought these two characters together, despite all of their differences. Combined, Max and Freak could break through any wall and named themselves "Freak the Mighty." These two friends showed me to not judge others on their physical appearance. Instead, it is best to look at the size of their heart.

Your book has encouraged me to listen to myself, no matter what other people might say. Max went from having a very low self-esteem to saving the day with Freak at his side. *Freak the Mighty* taught me that, sometimes, friendship is all that it takes. When Max was in danger, Freak sprayed Kenneth Kane in the eye with a squirt gun full of soap, vinegar, and curry powder that he claimed was sulfuric acid. Your book displays deep friendship and shows me that my friends will always be there for me, even in the hardest of times.

The third and final lesson that *Freak the Mighty* taught me was that friendship makes you a better person. Max and Freak had many adventures together. You made them fight criminals, escape bullies, and create a friendship like no other. When Freak had a seizure at his birthday party, he was immediately admitted to the hospital. Freak gave Max a blank notebook and told him to write the adventures of *Freak the Mighty*. You wrote that when Max went back to the hospital the next day, he found that Freak had died because his heart had become too big for his body. I felt sad when I read this, but the ending does teach us that friendship makes us a better person. It makes your heart grow.

I must thank you for writing such an amazing book. I have learned many lessons from reading it. You showed me to be nonjudgmental, listen to myself, and see that one can become a better person through friendship. One's heart can never *really* grow too big.

Sincerely,

Emma Tiberian

Emma Tiberian

Taking the battered old 1994 paperback off the shelf of that library was one of the best decisions I've ever made. From the very first word of *Walk Two Moons*, I found myself immersed in two stories as real as the smell of the cool winter air around me, or the squeaky leather sofa I was sitting on. Because the words didn't stay on the page-- they reached out to me with warm hands and changed me forever.

Salamanca was, to me, an enigma. She and I are as different as a dog and a cat-- she loved being outside, while I spent most of my time inside with a book; she lived in the country, while I lived in a southern suburb; the differences went on. But this contrast just drew me deeper into the book (or perhaps the book deeper into me) and I read on.

Sal's adventures across the country with her grandparents were a stark contrast to my rather tame life, and her bravery, subtle sense of humor, and strong sense to do right made me yearn, just a little, deep inside, to be more like her. (I hope that I have succeeded.)

When I started the book, I hadn't expected, in the least, the true fate of Sal's mother. So when Sal finally reached the end of her journey, I was shocked. And even though Sugar Pickford Hiddle wasn't my mother, that chapter in *Walk Two Moons* was one of the first times I'd cried while reading a book.

Walk Two Moons left me with a sense of longing, determination, and hope for the future. It has changed me in ways words cannot express, but I will describe what I can here-- I have attempted to integrate some of Sal's courage and integrity into my own personality; I strengthened my relationship with my mother (which is a choice I haven't regretted); and I have tried to open my mind to all people, no matter how strange or eccentric.

Ms. Creech, I don't know why you wrote *Walk Two Moons*-- whether writing is just something you loved doing, or you wanted to impact the world in the way you have impacted me. But if your motivation was the latter, then you can consider yourself successful, at least just a little bit.

And for that, you have my most heartfelt thanks.

Sincerely yours,
Emily Yi

Level II, 2nd Place

Charles Sanderson

Greenville
SC 29607

wrote it as a fact. Cath has brown hair. Cath is a fangirl. Cath has glasses.

It was like I spent half my life looking through a blue lens and the other half looking through a red lens, only when I put on the red lens I made sure to keep it hidden by a curtain of hair. I read Fangirl, and suddenly I could see the world in hues of violet; now I could do it with pride.

Not only did you write about fangirling like it isn't a mental disorder (which it isn't), but the way you depicted actual mental disorders, i.e. maina, was quite honestly the best depiction of mental illness of any sort that I've seen in any literature, let alone young adult. You showed it as it really is, you didn't just have some girl cry herself to sleep and call it depression. Mental illness is scary, it's ugly; it's toothpaste poems squeezed out onto mirrors and half-empty papers blanketing the living room.

When I was nine years old, my momma had a Year of Darkness. That's the pretty word for it, at least. In truth-- the big, bloody truth-- it was the year my mom got in bed and didn't get up. It was the year I fell asleep every single night listening to her crying. At first we-- my brothers and I-- would sneak into her room and try to ask if she was okay, but finally we couldn't possibly bear to hear her answer with tears. How could we be expected to? We were all between five and nine years old.

That year I only cried a single time. If I got hurt I wouldn't make a sound, if my heart was breaking I would take it in stride. I was so scared, I was terrified that what was happening to my momma would happen to me, that I'd catch her illness like a cold. That I'd start crying and I wouldn't stop.

The one time I cried was a few months into this terror. My dad was driving me home from school, and I couldn't hold it in any more. I asked him if I was going to turn out like her, if I was going to get sick. He hesitated, looking for the right words, and I took that silence as a yes. The dam broke, and I started to sob. The thing that I was so scared of was happening already. It was going to take me away, like it took her. He tried to comfort me, but his words made it worse. I only stopped when we walked in and I heard her crying. Immediately the image of my little brothers flashed before me, and I stopped. I couldn't let them see me like that, so I marched to my room, closed the door, and did my homework.

I didn't know enough about mental illness to realize that she needed help or to realize that I was gonna be okay. I was so scared for so long, far after the Year of Darkness ended. I didn't think that anyone was in a situation like mine, a child of mental illness. I felt like that until recently. Until I read Fangirl. When Cath had the flashback to Wren cradling her I burst into tears. It was the weirdest crying I've ever done; I was remembering all that happened that year, I was reliving all the fear from the Year of Darkness, but at the same time I was so happy to know that I wasn't the only one that felt like that. It hurts to think about this. I'm crying over my keyboard right now, but it was an important time in my life, albeit a terrible one. I need to write about it; I need to thank you. I know now. I'm not the only one.

Thank you for showing me that.

Thank you.

I am forever grateful,
Emmalynne Eshleman

Dear Mr. Pearson,

There are some books that you like, some that you love, and some that you downright adore. And then there are those books that are separate from the rest - books that burrow down deep into your soul and stay there... growing... becoming real. Books that change who you are and who you will become. You don't come across many of these books in your lifetime. And, when you are a young person, you are able to be changed, as the young mind is more open to suggestion and change. The rare few books that you do come across, those books, they are truly unique, and your books to me, Mr. Pearson, are even more unique. I suppose I never really intended to love your book, let alone be molded by it.

Your series *Kingdom Keepers* has helped me through some dark times. It has shown me that happiness can be found even when it seems like it is hopeless, especially when the darkness is part of you. You gave me some good nightmares, but you also gave me some great dreams. You filled me with hope and happiness. I had my first crush from your books (I know, that is both sad and weird). I already liked *Disney*, but your books made me *love Disney*.

Your books opened my eyes to a new kind of genre. I have made it my goal to find your books wherever I go. I have read every *Peter and the Starcatchers*, *Steel Trapp* and *Kingdom Keepers*. Your books are so good, I once read five of them in one day. Your books are filled with suspense and action. They are full of joy and great characters. Thank you for writing such remarkable books.

People often ask young children what they want to do when they grow up. Most kids respond by saying something like astronaut, doctor or veterinarian, but I responded with one thing: "I just want to work at Disney, maybe even become one of the Imagineers". Without your books, my answer would've probably been a lawyer or POTUS.

Since I was young, I have been told that I am a good leader. I have been reading books since I was 8 or 9, and now that I'm 12, it's safe to say that I owe almost half of my life to the thrill of your books. Your books taught me new ways to lead. I grew up loving books, traveling through worlds, dimensions and enjoying it... And when it came down to reading, I always did it willingly. It was great! As a little kid, the only thing that truly hit me deep in my core: getting threatened with my books being taken away as a punishment. Nobody could truthfully say that I hated any books.

Somewhere around third grade, I got a copy of your book, *Disney after Dark*. I was hooked immediately. I related tremendously to the main character; the only thing different about us was that he, Finn, had dreams - he became, what I thought at the time, the greatest person ever. He was (sort of) a superhero! He saved Disney Land at night from bad animatronics!- and I had no special powers or dreams. However, that didn't keep me from trying.

With these feelings, I couldn't put the book down. You gave me a sample of his world in a way that no other book has. It inspired me because it taught me that failing is not so bad. Your writing actually taught me that failing can be good to the extent that you learn from your mistakes. This concept that failing can ultimately be productive, played out in your story of Finn's and the other Kingdom Keepers' lives.

After an exhilarating night spent in my room reading *Disney after Dark*, I came downstairs in the morning, not being on the ground for more than a second because of loss of sleep and giddiness, and logged on to the computer. I searched the book on Google and found the author, and then I searched you and all of your books. I read those books. I was scared by *Peter and The Starcatchers*, I felt darkness with *The Return*, and was exhilarated by *Steel Trapp*. And that was when I discovered how truly real and personal books can be. From that moment forward, I knew exactly what I wanted to do, who I wanted to be. I wanted to be Charles Sanderson, the boy who goes out of his way to be kind, to help people, one who pleases his teachers, who feels the emotions of other people, who puts meaning behind friendship. I wanted to be the leader, if not the example. I wanted to love people with all of my heart. Things slip from the conscious, if not the subconscious, but your book did not.

That year was a great one. After a summer of fun, I came back to school full of hope, happiness and the will to lead. I pushed myself. I was kinder than I thought I could ever be. I believed that Finn Whitman could do it; I believed that I could, too. That was my last year at that school, as I was accepted into the great school I am in now. My current school is like my family; my peers and teachers help me when I feel weak, and they keep me going. I probably wouldn't have made it past the test that I had to take to qualify in if I didn't have books. Your books, more specifically.

As J.D. Salinger said, "What really knocks me out is a book that, when you're all done reading it, you wish the author that wrote it was a terrific friend of yours and you could call him up on the phone whenever you felt like it." That was what I wanted. I wanted to be a friend of yours. I knew it couldn't possibly become true, but it was what I wanted. Also, as William Styron said, "A great book should leave you with many experiences, and slightly exhausted at the end. You live several lives while reading."

Then, about one year ago, in November, I was having a struggle with appendicitis. After many weeks of pain and exhaustion, I felt really kicked to the curb and I felt that I was trash, often throwing myself a pity party. I had to miss a month of school and was in the hospital, missing my life. Meanwhile, there were kids *dying* from other illnesses, but I was feeling upset that I missed *school*. I didn't care about anyone else; I just wanted to be *fixed*. I could feel a rage building at other people. I became upset and mad. So, I decided I wanted to find a place of happiness, of hope.

And, as I felt I should do, I went to The Bible and prayed over the situation. But I also remembered there was a place of joy in other books, too. I took out your books. They made me feel better, stronger. They took away that rage, that anger. They made me go into a world where I could take my anger out on unreal things. I could feel the joy and happiness of Disney without having to go to Disney.

Now, I have an incentive. I try to be the kindest, most empathetic person I can be, whether it shows over the course of two hours or two years. I know that I truly can have hope, always. I know what I want to become. Thank you for making me the person I am today, Ridley Pearson. Truly, thank you.

Thank you,
Charles Sanderson

Level II, 3rd Place

Emmalynne Eshleman

December 1, 2016

Dear Ms. Rowell

All my life, I've been reading. I've read anything that I could manage to get my hands on. To be honest, I've loved every single second spent reading. But for years there was something hindering me. For the longest time I had a bit of internal prejudice against reading what was handed to me. If someone wanted me to read something, it was like a switch went off in my brain. I would swear to myself that I wouldn't read the book. I lost a lot that way.

I almost lost your book that way.

The first time I ever heard of *Fangirl* was when my cousin suggested I read it. She and I have always held vastly different opinions of books, a fact which marked a second strike for *Fangirl*. I told her that I'd read the book-- an empty promise. Every time I saw her for months afterward she'd ask "Did you read *Fangirl*?" Her badgering was the third strike for *Fangirl*. It seemed as though I was destined to live a life without your words, without Cather and Simon and Baz.

Until a few months ago, that is. Since I never read books that were recommended to me, I was forced to develop a system to find new books. Every time I finished a book, I'd go to my library's website and read the third book under "Recommended For You". It was a flawless system, until *Fangirl* popped up. An internal struggle ensued, two traditions battling for intergalactic supremacy. After an extremely thorough argument with myself, and the making of a high-class decision making system (i.e., the flipping of a coin), I resigned myself to reading it.

I pulled up an e-book and nestled into my comforters and pillows, determined to hate it. Alas, no amount of determination could have soured my opinions of *Fangirl*. The first time Levi grinned, *Fangirl* burrowed into my heart. I tore through it, finished hundreds of pages in just a few hours. Of course, my English essay was marked late (I was supposed to be finishing it while I was reading), but that was a small price to pay for a book of such great importance.

I have always thought that the best books make you either lose yourself or see yourself. *Fangirl* helped me to do both. Every time Cather wrote, I could hear her hit the keys in the fervor of an idea forming. I could feel Reagan's evolution, feel her going from annoyed to comforted by the sound. I could see the special smile that Levi reserved for Cath; I could see it spreading across his lips as he falls just a little more in love with her while he watches her frantically type as her desk as he's spread across her bed. I couldn't see my bedroom anymore, in front of me was not the dresser I've had for countless years, instead there was a bed, pushed against the wall with an angry young woman sitting there, glaring daggers at the ceiling. I almost couldn't believe how much you truly *cared* about Cath, because I couldn't picture someone caring about me like that. Your words made me feel as though I was a fallen angel-- or should I say wizard-- perched on Cath's shoulder.

It was much more than that though. Reading and learning everything about Cath made me feel like I really understood that side of myself better. For the first time I understood the *fangirl* part of myself. I've always known that I get too attached to figments of imagination, but I've never seen anyone else really acknowledge that. You didn't write it as a bad thing, you